

# HERITAGE LIVESTOCK

## Canada's first poultry breed

### Quebec's official chicken is built to beat the climate

Like its official colleagues the Vache Canadienne and the Canadian Horse, the Chantecler, Quebec's national chicken is a fine example of a multi-purpose breed. Unlike them however, the Chantecler finds its origin in the depths of ancient mythology rather than the isolation of early New France.

Brother Wilfrid Chatelain first thought of the idea for the Chantecler when he was walking through the Oka Agricultural Institute's poultry flocks with his visiting father and they realized there was no breed of chicken from Canada; all of the breeds being used in Canada originated in Europe or the United States. He wanted to create a breed of chicken that could stand the harsh climate of Canada, and that could be used for both egg and meat production.

Under the supervision of Brother Wilfrid, the monks of the Cistercian Abbey sought to create, "a fowl of vigorous and rustic temperament that could resist the climatic conditions of Canada, a general purpose fowl." Although work began on this breed in 1908, it was not introduced to the public

#### Dual-purpose chicken has roots in ancient fable

Brother Wilfrid wrote a letter in 1941 explaining how he chose the name Chantecler. The name was taken from a hero in the French poet Rostand's fable, popular in Paris about 1910, about the love between the rooster Chantecler and a golden pheasant hen. He thought that the name, derived from two French words, "chanter" – to sing and "clair" – bright, was ideal for his new breed. But the story of Chantecler was anything but new. Indeed it's one of the oldest stories known.

Aesop's Fable Odo of Cheriton first laid down the story of Chantecler, which was later taken up by the 12<sup>th</sup>-century poet Marie de France, then in Geoffrey Chaucer Nun's Priest's Tale, and in the Chantecler, by Edmond Rostand, author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. It is an animal allegory about a rooster who believes that his song makes the sun rise. It may also be the origin of the name Sinclair or Sainte-Claire.

until 1918, and admitted to the American Poultry Association Standard of Perfection in 1921.

The Chantecler was created by first crossing a Dark Cornish male with a White Leghorn female, and a Rhode Island Red male with a White Wyandotte female. The following season pullets from the first cross were mated to a cockerel from the second cross. Then selected pullets from this last mating were mated to a White Plymouth Rock male, thus producing the fowl as seen today. Although this produced a pure White Chantecler, Dr. J. E. Wilkinson of Alberta, Canada, decided to create a similar chicken with a color pattern more suited to range conditions, one whose color pattern would blend with its background. He crossed the Partridge Wyandotte, Partridge Cochin, Dark Cornish, and the Rose Comb Brown Leghorn, to create the Partridge Chantecler. The Partridge Chantecler was admitted into Standard in 1935.

The breed is noted for having nearly no wattles and a small cushion comb – the comb appearing much like a small round button sitting low on the head. The small comb and wattles allow this breed to withstand the cold Canadian winters without worry of frostbite. Not surprisingly, the breed is noted for being very hardy, is an excellent layer of brown eggs with a reputation as a good winter layer, and has a broad well-fleshed breast.

The Chantecler can still be found in both of its original colors, White and Partridge; both having yellow flesh and legs. It is an excellent choice for anyone wanting a productive fowl that will excel in a wintry climate. The





breed is noted for being calm, gentle, and personable.

An association, started in 1918, adopted strict rules to control breeding and ownership. A member could not sell, lease, lend, give or exchange any living bird of the new breed nor sell hatching eggs to anyone who was not a member of the association. It was also a requirement that the Association be given a full list of birds owned by members. This might not be a bad idea today especially with rare breeds of poultry.

The White Chantecler gained a lot of publicity at The First Canadian National poultry Conference in 1919 and was



**The Chantecler of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature – and postcards – was quite the rakish rooster. ‘Don’t cry over spilt champagne!’ — ‘Oh, you Chantecler Kid’. The Chantecler Curling Club wears its borrowed emblem with pride. On the other hand, the real chicken looks rather bland by comparison.**

officially declared a breed in 1921.

### **Recent Developments in the Breed**

In the 1990s there was an acrimonious discussion in the Canadian poultry press as to whether or not the original Chantecler was extinct. One faction said that they were extinct and that the current Chanteclers were a reconstituted version using Brother Wilfrid’s formula. The other side of the coin (breeders in Quebec) insisted that their birds were descended from the original birds from Oka. Whatever the truth, the breed is enjoying a resurgence in interest and most young stock is sold well in advance of the hatching season. In December 1999 the Quebec government officially designated the Chantecler as a provincial heritage animal.

The increased interest today has resulted in one breeder setting up four families of Chantecler and with careful attention to detail is bringing this bird back to the original Standard as visualized by Brother Wilfd. This is not an easy task, and following in the steps of Brother Wilfrid, heavy culling is an ongoing task.

The standards call for the males to weigh between 3.4kg to 3.9kg depending on age, and the female to weigh between 2.5kg and 3kg depending on age. (American Standards of Perfection, 1985).



A good strain will lay up to 210 eggs per bird in 1 year’s lay and the eggs should weigh about 58 to 60 grams. The egg colour is a light brown.

The world population size is estimated at 1750 to 2250. Most of the birds outside Canada are in the U.S.A. Current Canadian population size is 1000 to 1500 (estimate, Andre Auclair, April 2003). The greater part of this population is based in Quebec in small farm flocks:

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*The information on these pages is taken from Linda Gryner’s book, The Chantecler and Other Rare Breeds, and the web sites featherfancier.on.ca, albc-usa.org (American Livestock Breeds Conservancy).*